

HARTFORD STREET ZEN CENTER "NEWS"

57 Hartford Street -- Phone: 863-2507 -- Email: hszc108@yahoo.com -- Website: www.hszc.org -- May, 2007



An Open Tradition By Rev. Michael Wenger

Excerpts from HSZC talk May, 1998
and printed in HSZC Fall 1998 Newsletter.

This morning I'd like to talk about the role of tradition in our practice. What is distinctive about Buddhism as a religion is its great range of teachings, but we also have this saying, "Don't mistake the finger for the moon." Don't mistake the teachings or practices for the direction they are trying to point you in. We each have our stories, family history and tradition, and then there is a tradition you may have chosen. One exciting aspect of Buddhism in America the past 30 or 40 years, for those not from Asian backgrounds, is that it wasn't passively inherited. That is true even of our life histories, there is always interplay between where we are and what we choose.

There is a lot of understanding of tradition that can make it into an embalming agent, where it's all an enactment of something that happened before. Where our attachment to what we think of as tradition tries to reify a very alive "virus" into a fixed edifice. Another version, of non-tradition, has people rootless; as if what came before or will happen in the future didn't affect them. Like a detached entity not connected to the whole of what is going on in the world. Both of these are extreme views. But tradition and transmission is very much alive and not always quite what we think. That doesn't mean there isn't a tradition. By our study, we can find out what our preconceptions of tradition are, then we grope in the dark to see if we can find a way to realize the tradition.

When I first came to Zen Center in the late 60's, there was a great rush to Americanize the Dharma. For example, there was an idea that we shouldn't wear robes, we should wear denim fat pants, as if that was a freedom from a tradition. But could you imagine the tradition now if we had done that? Not that it was a bad idea, but we shouldn't jump over our understanding of modern, American, Asian, Zen, and what all those categories are. We have come a long way since then into looking at that and incorporating cultural forms.

We have a great opportunity now because many forms of Buddhism are coming at once. Traditionally, when you lived in a country, you came into contact with only one or two strains of Buddhism, or some alternate schools. But the whole brush of the tradition, as it comes through many different countries, lineages, and cultural adaptations, is now in front of us. Buddhism always adapts and infects the culture that it is involved in, because it's just what you do, it's how you live your life. So having an open tradition, a tradition that is open to the moment and doesn't deny the past, is very important.

Is tradition a set of understandings or behaviors, or does tradition put you on the stage where your life comes forth? It's a bit mysterious. Buddhism is a very sophisticated set of teachings and

practices that can help us experience "things as it is." But the danger is that we begin to think that the fingers themselves are what is important—then we either want to eliminate the fingers of tradition or enshrine the tradition. We still had to find our own way. Any tradition may get you in the doorway, out of the sidelines and marginalization in your own life, but it takes our participation and humbleness about what the tradition is. The tradition may be wider or narrower than what we think, it may be longer or shorter, but we should know how it comes to us and how useful it has been.

Of course the tradition changes and we shouldn't be afraid of that. There are points where a tradition or teaching may not be so useful, but that doesn't mean you should get rid of it, because it may be useful at other times. To start from a place of deep appreciation and gratitude for the tradition is very important, to respect the living tradition, and at the same time not be afraid to do something different. What we do here may seem old fashioned or inextricable, but this tradition has produced a body of work, a line of teachers, and a living spark-- that can ground us into the wideness of the past and present and future.

* Dairyu Michael Wenger is Dean of Buddhist Studies at SFZC, Author of "33 Fingers, A Collection of Modern American Koans," Editor-in-Chief of Wind Bell Publications and is in charge of Dharma group support at the San Francisco Zen Center. Photo from www.sfzc.org.

CONGRATULATIONS! JENNIFER and CLAY

After a brief engagement (14 years), Jennifer Birkett legally married her life partner, Clay Miller, on April 18th, 2007 in an intimate ceremony at Hartford Street Zen Center. Reverend Myo officiated the proceedings where the couple recited the sixteen Bodhisattva precepts, which include the Three Refuges. The bride carried pink sweetheart roses and Buckley (our temple cat) came into the zendo and quietly sat behind the couple during the service. Jim Shalkham was the maid of honor. A champagne reception followed with a delicious lemon wedding cake. When Jeff picked up the cake, he asked for a bride and groom on the top and the bakery had to break apart two plastic "same-sex" statues to get a bride and a groom (gotta love the Castro). Congratulations to the happy couple who then sped away for a honeymoon on Twin Peaks.

MAY DATES TO REMEMBER

May 2	Full Moon Ceremony
May 5	One-Day Retreat
May 9	Board of Directors Meeting
May 28	Zendo Closed: Memorial Day

HARTFORD STREET BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The HSZC Board of Directors has a small number of vacancies. The Board meets monthly to plan and oversee finances, events, and other aspects of life and practice at HSZC. If you're interested in joining or would like to find out more, please contact Mimi Manning or Larry Peiperl. Board directors will be elected at our Annual Membership Meeting **June 16th**.

THANK YOU to Rev. Edward Brown for his Dharma talk and special event at HSZC, to Jerome Peterson for his generous gift for a new kitchen floor, Steve Fricke for the beautiful new home altar, and Basya Petnick for sponsoring our Flower Arranging event.

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Richard Urban-Pottery-Flower Arranging-Crafts-May 12th

Richard Urban will sell tea and incense bowls, altar vases and unique ceramics Saturday, May 12th from noon-5pm. There will also be flower arranging by IXIA Flowers and Mimi Manning. And other HSZC artisans will showcase their handicrafts.

ZAZEN POSTURE:

YOGIC TOOLS FOR STEADY, COMFORTABLE SITTING
with Shosan Vicki Austin, Sunday June 10th from noon-2pm

How do I sit with the body I have? How about pain? What is constructive, and what is damaging? What do I do with my breathing? Is zazen posture meant for people of today?

In this two hour workshop, Victoria will work with participants in a group and one-on-one to address people's issues with the yoga of the zazen posture. Participants will leave with the tools to build a safe, comfortable seated posture that's realistic and sustainable for the present body and mind.

Shosan Victoria Austin is a priest and Dharma teacher at the SF Zen Center who maintains an Iyengar yoga practice. A certified Iyengar yoga teacher with 23 years teaching experience, she offers her knowledge of both Zen and yoga practices to shed light on the yogic foundation of zazen, one of our basic daily practices.

Class size is limited. Please wear comfortable clothes as we will be actively moving our bodies and come with an empty stomach. Suggested dana for Hartford Street Zen Center members is \$10 (non-members, \$15). Questions and registration, please call Julia Ten Eyck at 415-812-6089 or HSZC at 415-863-2507. Thanks.

Meditation and Recovery Retreat (Reported by Jim Shalkham)

In March, Jeffrey Schneider and Laura Burges conducted a half-day Meditation and Recovery Retreat at HSZC which I attended.

Jeffrey started with meditation instruction. He explained how he always dedicates the merit of his sitting for the benefit of others and thus, the meditation doesn't become about himself. He reminded us to let go of our desires or ideas about how or what we want this meditation to be or feel like. Laura instructed us on walking meditation and about including everything in our meditation rather than trying to shut things out. Then we got quiet and rested our minds.

After sitting, we did kinhin in the garden. More sitting and walking followed by a cookie break with Laura's homemade chocolate chippers. Mmm good. Laura and I were talking about some of the lesser addictions on the break, you know like TV, and we decided that chocolate didn't count. She said that's her middle name by the way (mine too).

Then back to the zendo for lecture. Jeffrey and Laura skillfully talked about the first three steps and addiction. Jeffrey framed his Dharma lesson around two koans and explained them to us in the context of our own lives. Laura taught us by offering wonderful insights from her third graders and spoke about the Zen phrase, "Only don't know," which can lead to an understanding about the open, groundless nature of being. She explained that a lot of mischief has been done in the world by people who are convinced that they are right and that in our sitting practice, and in our work in the world, we can cultivate a flexible, open mind, what Suzuki Roshi called, "Beginner's Mind."

After another sitting, we ended with a 12-step meeting focused on the eleventh step, prayer. I loved the topic of prayer, I'd like to say. How we all call out for healing, compassion and understanding for ourselves and others. After all, our life is a prayer, isn't it?

** * * Thanks to Laura and Jeffrey for hosting this event for HSZC.*

SAVE THE DATE -- September 8th, 2007
for HSZC's 25th Anniversary Fundraiser with Special Guest

Wild Geese Sangha by Julia Ten Eyck and Cynthia Kear

The Wild Geese Sangha (WGS) is a group of 8 to 10 women, who regularly meet to study and practice together. Our primary theme is infusing life with practice. This theme is both an inquiry and a support.

After her Jukai, Cynthia Kear wondered what it meant to have every aspect, every moment of life be practice, especially from a lay perspective where a predominant theme of practice is "practicing with those who don't formally practice." She thought a sangha with other women facing similar challenges would be an appropriate and beneficial container for this inquiry. She discussed this possibility with several other women and one night they gathered at Hartford Street Zen Center to begin a dialogue.

That was almost four years ago. And WGS has been meeting every other Monday night since then. Five members have been with WGS since its inception, while two other women have been with the sangha for over two years and one for almost two years.

Our teacher is Great Spirit Darlene Cohen. When first approached shortly after the sangha's inception, Darlene initially refused to consider this role as she wanted to shift her activities to her own sangha, Russian River Zendo. Additionally, she thought that the group would benefit more from a city-based teacher. However, when asked a third time (she is such a traditionalist!) and when told that we would gladly travel to Guerneville to spend a day of practice with her, she relented and became our beloved teacher.

While most sangha members have Darlene as their teacher, not all do, nor is it required. However, it is required that each sangha member have a relationship with a teacher, as well as a serious commitment to practice. Half have been, or will soon be, lay-ordained in Jukai. Two members are training for priest ordination.

When WGS meets at HSZC every other Monday evening, we meditate for 30 minutes and study for an hour. About once every six weeks, we travel to Guerneville to spend the day with Darlene, sitting, studying, walking & sharing a meal. We periodically invite other teachers to spend an evening of practice and study with us.

The group is not closed, nor is it a drop-in. Twice a year we are open to new members. Interested women are invited initially to meet with the sangha for an evening or two. We ask for a commitment of at least six months because we feel it takes that long to begin to get to know one another and it also allows us to maintain a core of depth, stability & consistency.

The sangha's name is from Mary Oliver's poem, *Wild Geese*:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.



If you are interested in exploring your place in the family of things, and how involvement with an intimate women's sangha might enhance your practice, please send an email to SFwildgeese@yahoogroups.com, or call Julia at (415) 812-6089.